

History, trauma and remembering in Kivu Ruhorahoza's Grey Matter (2011)

Article (Published Version)

Cieplak, Piotr (2018) History, trauma and remembering in Kivu Ruhorahoza's Grey Matter (2011). *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30 (2). pp. 163-177. ISSN 1369-6815

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/70358/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.



History, trauma and remembering in Kivu Ruhorahoza's *Grey Matter* (2011)

Piotr Cieplak

To cite this article: Piotr Cieplak (2018) History, trauma and remembering in Kivu
Ruhorahoza's *Grey Matter* (2011), Journal of African Cultural Studies, 30:2, 163-177, DOI:
[10.1080/13696815.2016.1244476](https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2016.1244476)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2016.1244476>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa
UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis
Group.



Published online: 15 Nov 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 717



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

History, trauma and remembering in Kivu Ruhorahoza's *Grey Matter* (2011)

Piotr Cieplak 

Department of Social Sciences, Media and Communications, College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UK

ABSTRACT

In 1994, the genocide in Rwanda claimed at least 800,000 lives in just 100 days. More than 20 years on, the memory and trauma of the atrocities still permeate the Rwandan society. This article explores how some of these different manifestations of trauma (individual and collective, actual and inherited, real and imagined, that of survivors and perpetrators), and especially their relationship to the genocide as a historical event, shape the internationally recognized Rwandan feature film, Kivu Ruhorahoza's *Grey Matter* (2011). Drawing on the scholarship on trauma, the article examines *Grey Matter's* uniqueness within feature films on the topic and its ambition to tackle the impossibility of memory and objectivity *vis-à-vis* varied experiences of the genocide. It traces the connection between trauma and *Grey Matter's* structure, which refuses to offer events a firm chronological placement, both within and beyond the narrative.

KEYWORDS

Rwanda; film; trauma; genocide; Ruhorahoza; memory; reconciliation

Introduction

In 1994, the genocide in Rwanda claimed the lives of at least 800,000 Tutsis. Twa and Hutus perceived to sympathize with the 'enemy' were also targeted. The programme of extermination lasted a mere 100 days. The numbers are striking – as is the practical aspect of the killings. Commentators such as Mahmood Mamdani and Peter Gourevitch have pointed out the physically arduous and intimate nature of the murders – done mostly by hand with machetes and garden tools (Gourevitch 2000, 17; Mamdani 2001, 6). While many died in a relatively short period, many also killed. Phil Clark estimates that in 2001 approximately 120,000 suspected génocidaires were detained in Rwanda's prisons, before the grassroot *Gacaca* justice system – a practice praised by some and criticized by others – began to clear the backlog (2012, 3).

The 1994 genocide was not the first outbreak of large-scale violence in Rwanda, with the first killings taking place in 1959, localized purges by Hutu extremists occurring between 1992 and 1993 and bloodshed continuing after the genocide, especially along the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Notwithstanding the genocide's chronological placing *vis-à-vis* other instances of violence, however, it has come to be

CONTACT Piotr Cieplak  piotr.cieplak@brunel.ac.uk

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

perceived and presented – especially by the Rwanda Patriotic Front-dominated government – as a caesura, a year-zero and, in some ways, a new nation founding event. And even though now, more than 22 years after the genocide, the nature of the memory and commemoration at the national level is changing – with more than half of Rwandan population born after 1994 and thus with no direct experience of the genocide and increased politicization and centralization of official memorial practices – the genocide and its trauma still permeate the Rwandan society (see Hatzfeld 2005, 2009; Hitchcott 2013). This article explores how some of these different manifestations of trauma (individual and collective, actual and inherited, real and imagined, that of survivors and perpetrators), and especially their relationship to the genocide as a historical event, are uniquely addressed and mediated in the internationally recognized Rwandan film, Kivu Ruhorahoza's *Grey Matter* (2011).

The genocide and images

Visual material showing actual violence and death in Rwanda between April and July 1994 is relatively scarce, especially when compared with the size of the archives of conflicts and unrest that emerge now, in the era of mobile phone image capture and social media. While images of corpses strewn in the streets and at massacre sites do exist and circulate, only one known piece of footage of actual genocidal killings survives. It shows the murder of a small group of people in a Kigali street, and was captured by Nick Hughes, a British cameraman (Hughes 2007; Thompson 2009; Cieplak and Wilson 2013).¹ There are many reasons for what images were and were not captured in Rwanda during the genocide. A limited number of reporters on the ground, issues of safety and access and the briefs received by the journalists (especially American) who did come all played a part (see, for instance, Thompson 2007; Dauge-Roth 2010, 222; Defraeye 2013, 83, 88). Allan Thompson writes that most American reporters in Rwanda 'were there with instructions to cover the attempts to rescue foreign nationals. And all but a handful left along with the evacuees in mid-April' (2007, 5).

And yet, images of the aftermath of the slaughter were available. But their journey to the public domain was stymied at the editorial end. For instance, American *Newsweek* did not devote a cover to Rwanda until 1 August 1994, more than a month after the genocide had ended and once the focus shifted to the refugee crisis in Zaire and Tanzania. It was there, in the camps, rather than during the genocide itself 'that most of the images of "Rwanda" that are imprinted on our memory were photographed' (Roskis 2007, 240). Thus, when it came to photographs and news coverage, the international public knew the genocide, for most part, by an event connected to it (the refugee crisis) but also quite separate.

Another set of images that came to visually signify the genocide manifested itself in the proliferation of international documentary and fiction films about it. Although some of the documentaries had big television and festival audiences, it was the fictional narratives that dominated the representational landscape (Defraeye 2013). *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) led the field in terms of international visibility and box office success. Other titles include: *100 Days* (2001), *Sometimes in April* (2004), *Shooting Dogs* (2005), *Un dimanche à Kigali* (2006), *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2007) and *Operation Turquoise* (2007). While significant differences can be found between some of these films, they have all been made by

non-Rwandan filmmakers (and, with the exception of *100 Days*, often crews and actors) and aimed at predominantly Western audiences. Alexandre Dauge-Roth rightly observes that these films need to be considered 'in the context of production, distribution and consumption largely determined by Western eyes, voices, references, and values' (2010, 170). Many of these films (with the exclusion, perhaps, of *100 Days*) have been challenged on grounds of historical veracity, stereotyping and their focus on the perspective of Western (mostly white) characters (see Adhikari 2007; Ndahiro and Rutazibwa 2008; Cieplak 2009, 2010a; Dauge-Roth 2010; Defraeye 2013) – traits particular to the representation of the Rwandan genocide but also African crises more generally.

Film in Rwanda

Just like the sustained visual interest in the country, film production and distribution in Rwanda started in the wake of the genocide. The many TV and film crews who arrived shortly after the event left behind a host of trained Rwandan professionals who understood that if they did not tell their stories, someone else would. The strong commitment of a number of individuals, international collaborations and Rwanda's relatively stable economic growth resulted in the creation of institutions such as the Rwanda Cinema Centre and the Kwetu Film Institute and established events such as the Rwanda Film Festival (see Cieplak 2010b; Dovey 2015). And while film penetration and availability in Rwanda (especially in rural areas) are still very limited, there has been a sustained push in the country to produce films in Kinyarwanda.²

It would be too simplistic and conveniently linear to see this effort to encourage local production as a coordinated scheme to reclaim the lens-based representation of the genocide and its legacy from the international blockbuster films so often using Rwandans as a backdrop for all kinds of stories and marred by stereotype and age-long representational power imbalance between the global North and South. However, there is an element of duty in the way in which some Rwandan film professionals – by no means all and probably not Ruhorahoza – see their practice in relation to the genocide. Eric Kabera, the founder of the Rwanda Cinema Centre and one of the country's most visible directors and producers, states that his efforts were motivated by the ambition to create: 'a team of men and women who can participate in the process of recording the genocide ...' (Cieplak 2009, 200).

But film production does not exist in a vacuum. While the aspiration to tell a Rwandan story of the genocide in Kinyarwanda – and by Rwandan directors – is fundamentally necessary, it has to be seen in the context of the political discourses around the genocide in the country. These, at least on the official level, focus largely around issues of justice, commemoration and reconciliation and rebuilding a unified nation immune to ethnic division and hatred that fertilized the genocide.³ The latter has dominated Rwandan fictional narratives (mostly short films) on the topic (see Cieplak 2010b). While this focus is understandable and reflects the governmental discourse as well as the actual wishes of a significant part of the Rwandan population, it is necessary for it to gesture towards or at least acknowledge the complex and not inevitable nature of the reconciliatory process. Otherwise, there is a real risk that the engagement with the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation occurs *in lieu* or at the expense of a meaningful exploration of trauma and difficulty of post-genocide cohabitation. *Grey Matter* offers a uniquely complex and character-based exploration of these processes. Its perspective on the legacy of the genocide is

bleak, as is its portrayal of the different ways in which the genocide continues to traumatize parts of the Rwandan population. The film's focus on the restorative potential of artistic expression and its refusal of the promise of reconciliation (substituted instead with a quest for personal closure) responds to something beyond the director's self-declared pessimism (Naimasiah 2015). When asked about reconciliation, Ruhorahoza says: 'If my family had been massacred, I could certainly live next to the killers, but would I reconcile with them? I'm not sure' (Naimasiah 2015).

Grey Matter

Frieda Ekotto writes that *Grey Matter* is 'an important reflection on how Rwandans imagine, speak of, and visualize the relics of trauma. It traces, in different domains and voices, dynamics of abjection and pain and the ethics of love both in and beyond trauma' (2013, 231). *Grey Matter* stands out from the body of feature-length fictional narratives about the genocide, in that it tackles the impossibility of memory and objectivity *vis-à-vis* varied experiences of the event, rather than focusing on representing singular episodes from the genocide whose emotional, narrative pull is largely dependent on elements of genre and mostly exercised within the realist convention. *Grey Matter's* at once fragmented and cyclical narrative structure, the refusal of causally driven chronology and the frequently surreal interventions reject the aspiration to contain the genocide within the story, so often evident in fiction features on the topic. Noosim Naimasiah observes that *Grey Matter* does 'not provide an internal coherence and a respectful closure that creates the illusion that the end of the film is in fact the end of the genocide' (2015). But neither is it what one might call a Rwandan response to such representations. There is not a sense that the story or the employment of a particular film style is aimed at Rwandans more than anyone else. In fact, Ruhorahoza disagrees with the idea of delivering a nation- or culture-specific film. He says:

we were making a film about violence and trauma. I didn't want [...] to obsess on the idea of delivering something that felt truly Rwandan and something that would please Rwandans [...] my film is much more appreciated by western audiences. I've sometimes felt that I was being accused of making films that were more muzungu than muzungu films themselves. (Naimasiah 2015)

He goes on to reject the idea of African essentialism in film and adds:

we are often told that 'African films' are supposed to be simplistic and not artistically ambitious. That's obviously a stupid and dangerous view that is being promoted by some lazy distributors, directors, producers and festival programmers. In my country at least, all other forms of arts [...] are highly coded, are highly complex and we are used to them being such. Why can't we be equally demanding and try transpose those levels of sophistication in our cinemas? So, no, there's no easy communication with my people around my work just because I'm Rwandan. (Naimasiah 2015)

Ruhorahoza is one of the most internationally visible and recognized Rwandan fiction filmmakers. He has had a considerable success – mostly on the film festival circuit. *Grey Matter* was Ruhorahoza's first feature and had its international premiere at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival in New York, where it won the Best Actor in a Fiction Film Award for Ramadhan 'Shami' Bizimana and earned Ruhorahoza a Special Jury Mention.

The action of the film unfolds in three acts (although their chronological positioning is undermined throughout). The first follows Balthazar (Hervé Kimenyi), a young filmmaker in Kigali, as he tries to secure funding for his film project: *The Cycle of the Cockroach*. The two instalments that follow show Balthazar's film: the two *Cycles*. The first one is devoted to the anonymous Madman (JP Uwayezu)⁴ – a prisoner or a resident of a mental asylum who perpetrated crimes during the genocide, now plagued by visions and obsessed with a cockroach which he has captured in a glass jar. The *Second Cycle* follows two siblings, Yvan (Bizimana) and Justine (Ruth Shanel Nierere), now adult, orphaned during the genocide, who are trying or trying not to come to terms – each in their own way – with their imagined and actual experience.

Ekotto writes that the three parts of *Grey Matter* 'are connected by trauma, and as the film progresses we begin to wonder which events happened and which exist in the minds of the characters' (2013, 231). In many ways, *Grey Matter* is a film about different ways of dealing with the past – real, imagined, rejected and desired. The unreliability of the characters (including the filmmaker and the 'objective' camera whose presence is acknowledged at the very end) goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the subjectivity of remembering and experiencing the past. Dauge-Roth writes that in the externally made genocide films:

the personalized *history* through which we are invited to reflect on the genocide's *History* rests upon an arrangement of images and plot according to a particular set of themes and issues, which not only represent a memorialization of the past but also a deliberate positioning within the present ... [the films] put forward a version of history that both conditions what is judged to be worthy of memory and determines the lenses that give the genocide of the Tutsi the possibility of readability. (2010, 170-171)

In *Grey Matter*, 'the genocide's *History*' is almost entirely consumed by the 'personalized' *histories* of the characters. But this devouring does not serve to simply mediate *History* through *histories*. What it signals instead is the irrelevance of historical objectivity when confronted with the subjectivity of experience and personal trauma. While the past does have a hold over the present, in that it haunts the characters, motivates some of their actions and implies why they are where they are, its connection to the present is not straightforward – as is not, in fact, the delineation of chronological boundaries. Does this mean that the film denies the genocide the possibility of readability? The genocide certainly remains readable in the sense that it continues to affect and compel the characters of the film. But what is less available is the idea of narrative containment – habitually a companion of readability as conceptualized by Dauge-Roth. The containment and readability are equally elusive at the political, historical level of the genocide as they are at the level of the individual characters' relationship to their past and present (both marked and conditioned by the experience of the genocide). The result of this dual slip-page affects the viewer, whose ability to grasp and 'read' the *History* and *histories* is challenged and questioned throughout the film. The 'personalized' *histories* are no longer used to contextualize, explain or historically ground the genocide – to make it readable in this sense. What we witness instead is a spilling over of the remnants (always fragmented, always incomplete) of the genocide, of the past, into the various presents of the film. It is a spilling over that lacks the clear causal and explanatory links so strongly present in other films and offers both formal and narrative engagement with trauma.

The filmmaker

The first few scenes of *Grey Matter* show Balthazaar, a single-minded filmmaker in Kigali, trying to get his film project off the ground. During a meeting with an official from the film commission, Balthazaar hears that the script he had submitted is creative but does not meet the funding criteria. The official adds that he would be happy to give Balthazaar another chance if he were to write a film about HIV-prevention or gender-based violence – issues currently on the government's agenda. He says: 'Our people have to be able to see their faces and hear their language on screen.' On the one hand, these words echo the important ambition of bringing films made by Rwandans to Rwandans. In a more genocide-specific context, this can also be interpreted as part of the ongoing effort by Rwandan image-makers to reclaim the story of the genocide and its consequences from internationally dominant films made by mostly Western directors and producers. On the other hand, the scene emphasizes – and this seems to be Ruhorahoza's main point here – how such a noble ambition can be reductive if treated perfunctorily.

Unable to obtain funds for his project, Balthazaar decides to push on regardless. He visits his actors, whom he is supposed to rehearse. We see a man and a woman in an empty room, and Balthazaar waving to them from a distance. Importantly, only the actress's face is visible, the man is hiding his head in his hands, away from the camera. A motorcycle helmet rests next to him. Balthazaar gestures to the actress, promising to return shortly. We next see him meeting his producer, Mary. She challenges the Western influences on Balthazaar's project. In the opening close ups of Balthazaar's room at the beginning of the film, we see a number of books by Kant, de Sade, Irving and Houellebecq. When he explains his vision to Mary, Balthazaar also mentions the rape scene in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), and Gaspard Noé's *Irréversible* (2002).

When asked about the presence of Western cultural influences in the film, Ruhorahoza talks about Balthazaar's frustration with the lack of film culture in his country: 'The only references that Balthazar could get, the only literature that he has access to, is from the West. It is autobiographical in that sense' (De Groof 2012). This point serves to underscore Balthazaar's isolation as an artist and ties with the lack of understanding of his idea by the powers that be (the film commission) but also his peers (Mary). He tells her:

It's this I'm denouncing. The endless cycle of violence. This cycle of the cockroach. This cockroach that is stigmatized and has to hide and finally has to counter-attack because it just can't take it anymore [...] And that cockroach is a snake in one country and a scorpion in another. What do they get at the end? Blood, wars, despair, famine, madness and death. And so it goes on, in every country of this damned ridiculous continent.

As Balthazaar delivers this mission statement, there is a cut to a cockroach – a shot that will later return in Balthazaar's film-within-the-film. This is the first of a number of instances when the story the filmmaker is so compelled to tell invades the 'real' filmic world. It is not a flashback or a flashforward but rather an interjection that lacks a clearly defined perspective. If a traumatic intrusion is at stake here, it is a disembodied, collective trauma that is being signalled. A cockroach is, of course, a potent symbol in the Rwandan context. The term (*inyenzi* in Kinyarwanda) was commonly employed to describe the invading RPF rebels, but also all the Tutsis (and their perceived Hutu and Twa collaborators) living inside Rwanda. Ruhorahoza takes this process of dehumanizing the enemy and extends it beyond Rwanda. This move beyond the national but not beyond the specific returns

later in the film when the details of the events befalling the Madman, Justine and Ivan are revealed. While they are recognizable to anyone with even a basic knowledge of the circumstances of the Rwandan genocide, they do not rely on naming countries, people and events. Rather, they display processes (propaganda broadcasts), details (cooking avocados in absence of other available food) and so on. They are more recalls than contextualized historical facts. What this focus also allows for is an exploration of the dynamic (social and psychological) of violence and its aftermath, rather than a historical account, which usually suggests the potential for causality and closure. But it would not be correct to suggest that the effects of political and personal violence are universalized in *Grey Matter*. In fact, they are horribly, intimately tied to the characters and environments they inhabit (the cell for the Madman, the chaotic, fortress-like house compound for the siblings and the dangers and opportunities offered by the world outside these isolated spaces for all three). But the violence and trauma do leave the confines of the national. There is a sense that the story has its own existence in the world, not only independent of history but also the narrative.

After the meeting with Mary, Balthazaar continues with his preparations to start the shoot. There is an impression that the story is taking over Balthazaar's reality – whether he wants it or not. The film-within-the-film – *The Cycles* – feels like something that demands to be told. It invades the filmic 'now' inhabited by Balthazaar: whole scenes are played out in Balthazaar's head (which we will re-watch later on, once *The Cycles* begin), Balthazaar partially re-enacts other parts of his project (taking on the roles of the actors) and tries out the dialogue. When he and Mary discuss the film, they speak about its plot points as if they have already happened. This lack of narrative linearity and the coexistence of different parts of the filmic world, the challenge they pose to the idea of chronology create the impression that the story of the *Cycles of the Cockroach* has already happened as well as is waiting to happen.

The acknowledgement of Western influences on the both *Grey Matter* and the *Cycle of the Cockroach*, its importance for both Ruhorahoza and Balthazaar, as well as the disturbance of chronological and narrative order present in the first part of the film, signal *Grey Matter's* positioning within a body of texts formally engaged with the representation of trauma – fulfilled once *The Cycles* are underway. Writing about the filmic medium and trauma's shared history, Roger Luckhurst points to cinema's effectiveness 'at developing formal conventions in which the disordering of narrative presages the revelation of a traumatic secret' and, referring specifically to a group of 1990s films (films produced largely in North America and Europe), singles out a trend of 'plots presented backwards, in loops, or disarticulated into mosaics that only retrospectively cohere' that is 'partly driven by attempts to convey the experience of traumatized subjectivity' (2008, 178). *Grey Matter's* relationship with trauma, mapped out in this initial section and then executed later on, takes place exactly at the level of narrative (dis)ordering that enables formal engagement with 'traumatized subjectivity' that goes beyond the device most commonly associated with cinematic evocation of trauma: the flashback.

This creeping in of the world of the film within the film into Balthazaar's 'real' world continues through the first part of the film, culminating in an auditory and visual amalgamation. We see Balthazaar delivering parts of the dialogue, intercut with the actual scenes featuring the actress we saw in the rehearsal room. Lying in bed, Balthazaar begins to hear a hate radio broadcast, which then carries through to the first part of *The Cycle*,

where we are acquainted with the Madman, whose first act is to capture in a jar a cockroach that has crept under the closed door.

The Madman

In the confines of the prison cell, we continue to hear the female voice on the radio, who uses derogatory language to describe 'the enemies' within the nation, branding them as cockroaches. This is a reference to the real-life radio station RTLM, a hate propaganda broadcaster which played a significant part in the 1994 genocide (Melvern 2000).

The Madman's section of *Grey Matter* is punctuated by frequent moments of surrealism. He rants at the cockroach, is plagued by visions that influence his immediate environment. In a relatively quick succession of sequences, we see pictures of different types of cockroaches appearing on the walls with lists of names underneath them (referencing the lists of names of Tutsis and suspected collaborators used during the genocide), a pre-genocide flag of Rwanda (with a slight alteration – the letter R in the middle substituted with the letter K), various shots of hands passing the Madman objects through the barred window of his cell and cuts to extreme close-ups of boots walking in the grass. The anonymous hands give the Madman food, beer, pills, marijuana and a machete. After the Madman consumes the drugs provided, a projection appears on the wall of his cell that shows the making of an omelette sprinkled with live cockroaches. We are then presented with the rape of the cockroach, described earlier in the film by Balthazaar. The Madman leans down next to the jar and simulates sexual activity.

The last object the Madman receives is a key. It is handed to him by a white hand. The key stands for facilitation, a means of escape. It can be seen as a general comment about the complacency of the Western powers in 1994. More specifically, the facilitation can also be interpreted and was intended as such by Ruhorahoza, as a finger pointed at France, who not only provided political backing and military training for the genocidal regime, but also led Opération Turquoise (Wallis 2006). The operation's aim was to assure the safe passage of refugees to camps in Zaire, but in actuality, it resulted in creating a route of escape for many genocide perpetrators.

This fragmented and abstracted (remembered and imagined) *History* of the genocide is presented to the viewer as the memory (or *history*) belonging to the Madman. Historical context, the circumstances of and the build up to the genocide are usually provided in fictional films on the topic with the use of opening intertitles or awkward expository dialogue sequences. In *Grey Matter*, the context comes in the form of the visions and flashbacks of the past belonging to the Madman that, depending on interpretation, haunt or sustain him in his cell, while providing the viewer with a subjective look into the past. This past keeps returning in episodes, snippets and more cohesive narratives that refuse to be assigned a clear chronological positioning. They are not exactly flashbacks but rather symbolic intrusions that pierce the fragile film of the present. In this sense, and especially in relation to the portrayal of the genocidaire, 'Ruhorahoza problematizes the interrelations between the psychic and the social' (Ekotto 2013, 232). Equally crucial is the fact that the visions, snippets and mini-narratives of the past have concrete influence on the present. In a Lynchian moment in the film, the Madman is handed the keys and is able to escape his cell, *The Second Cycle of the Cockroach* begins.

Justine and Yvan

The Second Cycle tells the story of Yvan and Justine, orphaned during what they refer to as the war – an event whose scattered descriptions reference the particularities of the Rwandan genocide. It explores trauma in relation to the two siblings who, more straightforwardly than the Madman perhaps, display various symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

We recognize Justine as the actress from the rehearsal room to which Balthazaar never returned. At the beginning of this part of the film, she is the more functional of the two siblings, more integrated into the outside world, at least seemingly. But this integration comes from a hurtful necessity rather than choice. She sacrifices herself in order to provide for Yvan who seems more obviously traumatized by the memory of the genocide. We first meet Justine in an office of a doctor whom she has to provide with sexual services in exchange for medicine for Yvan. Throughout this section, we also observe her trying to convince her brother to take up painting again (there is a suggestion that he used to paint before the genocide) and making efforts to snap him out of his inertia. The challenges of this futile quest – as well as her own demons – cause Justine to internalize her pain. This is shown through scenes of looking in the mirror, smoking pensively and drinking vodka from the bottle.

Yvan is not as immediately recognizable as Justine. The actor from the beginning of the film does not reveal his face (which means he could be either Yvan or the Madman) and when we meet Yvan in *The Second Cycle*, he is constantly wearing a motorcycle helmet. As well as signalling a mental disturbance, the helmet also implies to the viewer that Yvan is hiding physical scars of the genocide underneath it. Ruhorahoza claims that one of the reasons for using the helmet was to make thin Yvan resemble a cockroach (De Groof 2012) – an image imposed by the Madman and his genocidal backers.

Yvan's symptoms of PTSD are more explicit. Beyond the constant presence of the figuratively and literally protective headwear, Yvan does not leave the family compound (a vast and messy building which suggests erstwhile wealth) and is plagued by horrific scenes from the past, which, for him, are impossible to distinguish from the reality of the present. He sees bodies burning in the drive and on television; he tries to put them out with buckets of water. He sees scenes of rape of his mother and his sister. The visions are invasive, lifelike, and, for Yvan, completely overwhelming. Everyday activities too are marked by references to past trauma. When told to prepare some food for himself, Yvan opts for cooked avocados; a food commonly associated with time of war. When left at home on his own, he hides in the narrow space between the outside roof and the inner ceiling of the house – again a common hiding place for Rwandan Tutsis during the genocide.

Yvan's sensory engagement with the past and his enslavement by the traumatic images, presented alongside Justine's relative functionality, initially suggest that it was he who experienced and witnessed the greatest horror during the genocide. However, it eventually transpires in a conversation with Justine that he was not in the country during the war. Justine was, and was raped. Ruhorahoza highlights here the complexity of trauma (possible to be experienced by those without direct experience of the traumatic event) and the difficulty of defining what constitutes a survivor – issues intimately tied to *Grey Matter's* characters but which also strongly resonate with some of the definitional challenges faced by Rwandans.

Yvan and Justine's roles in each other's lives are reversed towards the end of *The Second Cycle*, when they are informed about the discovery of a mass grave potentially containing the remains of their parents. The news marks the beginning of Justine's unravelling. She confronts Yvan about the fact that he was not in the country during the war. Slowly, Justine begins to fall apart.

The original sources of the trauma, especially for Yvan and Justine, are mostly hinted at, suggested in the film – never properly integrated into its fabric. They are missed both in the literal (by Yvan who was not in the country during the genocide) and in the figurative sense (by Justine who is unable or unwilling to process and acknowledge what happened to her). Both instances resonate with Cathy Caruth's observation about the dynamics of 'the *missing* of this [traumatic] experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time* it has not yet been fully known' (1996, 62). This epistemological challenge, accompanied by the intrusion of the event into the present, affects the characters, the viewers but also the very world of *Grey Matter*.

Yvan (without his helmet) and Justine attend the excavation of their parents' grave together. The Madman from *the First Cycle* (dressed in a manner associated with genocide perpetrators in Rwanda who, while doing public works, don pink or orange uniforms) is doing the digging. He looks up and grins at the siblings. The garden tool in his hand suddenly transforms into a machete. This is a point of no return for Justine. Ruhorahoza says: 'the moment she starts having hallucinations is when she crosses lines and lets things go' (De Groof 2012). From now on, Yvan takes over as a carer, albeit very briefly. When they are back in their family compound, Justine tells him that there will be no more medicine for him. Her currency to pay for it were sexual favours and now she says that she does not have anything left to pay the doctor with. Yvan responds: 'Don't worry, little sister.' A scene follows in which Yvan recites Justine a poem while she is sitting on a swing – infantilized, on the one hand, and vindicated, on the other.

While the exhumation seems to offer Yvan some closure, for Justine, it opens previously repressed and managed emotions.⁵ Again, Ruhorahoza transcends the specificity of his characters' situation and highlights the common complexities of dealing with the trauma of the genocide but also how the different rituals that surround its memory in Rwanda (commemoration ceremonies, exhumations of bodies, display of human remains at memorials, etc.) can have different effects on survivors and the families of victims. It could be argued that the concreteness of locating and retrieving the bodies makes it no longer possible for Justine to deny or repress her experience. The necessity to acknowledge it then overwhelms her completely, while offering a silently cathartic experience to Yvan, who can finally directly participate in the trauma and horror of the genocide – a participation that thus far has been necessarily imaginary. But Ruhorahoza does not offer such neat explanations. All we see on the screen are suggestions, themselves veiled in ambiguity. In the final scenes of *The Cycle*, we see Justine, dishevelled, catatonic, on a bed in what looks like a hospital room. She is looking at a cockroach traversing the floor and crossing under the door to another room where it is captured in a glass by a hand, which, we assume, belongs to the Madman. This marks a completion as well as well as a beginning of the cycle. Trauma, memory and experience travel between characters, timelines and spaces, touching everyone they encounter in different ways.

Grey Matter ends with the camera slowly pulling away from a close-up of a woman playing an inanga (a traditional Rwandan instrument played) to reveal a film set and a

crew. A voice over (Balthazaar's) concludes the film describing it as 'a story about the porous borders between reality and parallel realities. Just like at the movies. Just like in real life'.

Trauma and mastering the past

There is a suggestion (stated firmly by Ruhorahoza in interviews [De Groof 2012] and a little more ambiguously in the film) that Balthazaar is telling his own story. The imaginary and real worlds of the film are thus further interwoven. While it is possible to distinguish the film-within-the-film (the two *Cycles of the Cockroach*) from the 'now' of when Balthazaar is trying to make the film, the two worlds encroach on each other. As we have seen, *The Cycles* especially demand to be told, spill over to the 'now', to the 'real'. While this intrusion points to the presence of trauma and the way it permeates the Rwandan society, it also bears significance when it comes to presenting the genocide as a readable event. Naimasiah (2015) observes that the fact that, unlike most other films about the genocide, *Grey Matter* does not have a chronological narration means that 'Memory, acting, and lived reality are produced simultaneously' and goes on to ask whether this simultaneity could signal something about 'the temporality of pain and the multiple realms it occupies.' *Grey Matter*, through its non-linearity, narrative unreliability and refusal to filmically objectivize, engages with the ultimately subjective experience and trauma of the genocide (experienced as well as imagined). And yet, the film also manages to tap into something that transcends individual experiences. What is at stake here is not exactly the tension between the *History* and *histories* of the genocide and its aftermath. Rather, the collective complexity of remembering and living with trauma – a complexity that manages to avoid the often reductionist national or political terms, and succeeds in retaining the overwhelming and invasive intimacy of recollection, recurrence and presence. The unreliability of memory, recall and chronology is explored not only through characterization but also the film's structure and the lack of clearly delineated hierarchies of knowledge that habitually accompany film-within-a-film narratives.

There is a direct link between the 'traumatized subjectivity' so strongly accentuated in *Grey Matter* and the kind of purchase the viewer and the characters can have on the past, the present and the future of the film's world. Joshua Hirsch, writing about film's engagement with trauma in the context of the representation of the Holocaust, mentions the rejection of the 'classical realist forms of film narration traditionally used to provide a sense of mastery over the past' (2004, 3). The idea of the refusal to present the past as mastered or masterable runs very deeply throughout *Grey Matter* and, in many ways, provides its narrative framework. This is manifested through the already mentioned encroachment of the past on the present but also through the confusion between chronological timelines and the viewers' inability to tell what has already happened and what is yet to happen, what is real and what is imagined.

Trauma is present in *Grey Matter* in the characterization, narrative structure and formal intrusions and interventions that break the realist convention. The power of these formal choices is such that trauma becomes something that feels almost independent, disembodied, impossible to contain within a single character, consciousness or event and yet intimately linked to all of them. Trauma in *Grey Matter* can be seen as 'not only the retarded effect of and external accident but also something in excess of that original accident, the

sense that the effects of the accident exceed, symptomatically and temporarily, the accident itself' (Sutton 2004, 390). In a context more specific to Rwanda, writing about Caruth's statement that 'the traumatized [...] carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess' (1995, 5), Nicki Hitchcott observes that 'rather than possessing the past, survivors of trauma are possessed by it' (2013, 82). She goes on to note that 'often trauma survivors try very hard not to remember, but memories return anyway in the form of nightmares and flashbacks or "acting out", common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder' (2013, 82). This form of recall and inability to process the experience temporarily and narratively is well documented in literature based on Rwandan survivor testimony (see for instance, Hatzfeld 2005, 2009) but also numerous studies of the occurrence of PTSD in Rwanda (see, for instance, Pham, Weinstein, and Longman 2004; Rieder and Elbert 2013).

Grey Matter's punctuated departures from the realist convention make it rather unique amongst Rwandan genocide films. Admittedly, a subgroup of these films defined by Madelaine Hron as 'interpretative' – films that 'attempt to merge the present and the past, the terror of the genocide and its lingering trauma for survivors' (2012, 135) – distribute their action across chronological timelines with the use of flashbacks such as in *Sometimes in April*. But while the past does intrude on the present in these films, it is mostly through its effect on the characters (who struggle to come to terms with and are damaged by what happened to them) or through full flashbacks – cuts to shots spatially and temporally separate from the diegesis of the present. No matter how emotionally difficult, how violent or how disturbing, a clear causality is usually established between the traumatic event(s) and its effects. This causality does not diminish the complexity of the experience and its aftermath, but the logical and rational bridge it builds between the past and the present often results in the impression that the past can be mastered, explained and, eventually, processed. In other words, that the traumatic event can be eventually incorporated into the pool of other experiences and placed chronologically (thus disabling its power to intrude). Piet Defraeye observes that many fiction films about the genocide 'struggle with a compulsive need for structured narration' (2013, 82). This struggle to order and contain also echoes the illusion mentioned by Naimasiah that the end of the film is synonymous with the end of genocide (or the impact of its aftermath). *Grey Matter* refuses the option of mastery over not only the *History* of the genocide but also its individual, personal *histories*. It also suggests the impossibility of containment, if not readability. *Grey Matter's* cyclicity, narrative structure and lack of conclusion (beyond, perhaps, an ambiguous nod towards the possibility of restoration through artistic expression), as well as the trauma that pierces the film (both formally and in terms of the plot), work against history, against knowledge but not against understanding.

Notes

1. Hughes himself claims that two other recordings (not his) of genocidal deaths exist (Dauge-Roth 2010, 222). See also Möller (2013).
2. The Rwandan Cinema Centre (now incorporated into the Kwetu Film Institute) and the Rwanda Film Festival were founded and run by Eric Kabera – an influential producer and director. For some years in the early 2000s, they dominated the Rwandan filmmaking landscape but were not the sole film initiative in the country. Efforts of individual, non-associated filmmakers also added to the output as did organisations such as Almond Tree Productions. Since then,

film production and training has proliferated and is much less centralized and more heterogeneous, with The Kwetu Film Institute remaining quite influential.

3. There is a political dimension to this aspiration often challenged by those opposing the current government. Some very visible governmental policies, such as the simultaneous erasure of ethnicity from documents and public discussion and its almost compulsory re-introduction into the language used to refer to the genocide, go hand in hand with complete (at least officially) silence about alleged RPF crimes committed in the wake of the genocide or the increasingly problematic issues of inherited guilt felt amongst some young Rwandans of Hutu heritage.
4. I am employing the word 'Madman' following its use by Ruhorahoza in the interview with De Groof (2012).
5. The exhumation, reburial and/or display of skeletal remains in Rwanda are subject to a rich debate. See, for instance, Vidal 2001; Guyer 2009 and Ibreck 2010.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Piotr Cieplak  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9839-3225>

References

- Adhikari, Mohamed. 2007. "Hotel Rwanda: Too Much Heroism, Too Little History, or Horror?" In *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen*, edited by Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, 279–299. Cape Town: Double Storey, James Currey and Ohio University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1995. "Introduction." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 3–12. Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caton Jones, Michael, dir. 2005. *Shooting Dogs*. ARTE, BBC Films, Egoli Tossel Film, UK Film Council.
- Cieplak, Piotr. 2009. "Image and Memory: An Interview with Eric Kabera." *French Cultural Studies* 20 (2): 199–208.
- Cieplak, Piotr. 2010a. "The Rwandan Genocide and the Bestiality of Representation in 100 Days (2001) and Shooting Dogs (2005)." *Journal of African Cinemas* 2 (1): 49–63.
- Cieplak, Piotr. 2010b. "Alternative African Cinemas: A Case Study of Rwanda." *Journal of African Media Studies* 2 (2): 73–90.
- Cieplak, Piotr, and Emma Wilson. 2013. "The Afterlife of Images: Rwanda." In *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium*, edited by Axel Bangert, Robert Gordon and Libby Saxton, 190–204. Oxford: Legenda.
- Clark, Phil. 2012. *How Rwanda Judged its Genocide*. London: Africa Research Institute.
- Dauge-Roth, Alexandre. 2010. *Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History*. Lanham, MA: Lexington Books.
- Defraeye, Piet. 2013. "The Rwandan Genocide in Film, and a Sunday in Kigali: Watching with a Pierced Eye." *Imaginations* 4 (1): 82–105.
- De Groof, Matthias. 2012. "Grey Matter, an Interview with Kivu Ruhorahoza." *Film Africa*, 26th 2012. Accessed May 5 2015. <http://www.filmafrica.org.uk/blog/interview-kivu-ruhorahoza-director-grey-matter>.
- Dovey, Lindiwe. 2015. *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ekotto, Frieda. 2013. "Review of Grey Matter (2011)." *African Studies Review* 56: 231–234. doi:10.1017/asr.2013.70.

- Favreau, Robert, dir. 2006. *Un Dimanche à Kigali*. Equinoxe Productions.
- George, Terry, dir. 2004. *Hotel Rwanda*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Lionsgate Films.
- Gourevitch, Philip. 2000. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*. London: Picador.
- Guyer, Sara. 2009. "Rwanda's Bones." *Boundary 2* 36 (2): 155–175. doi:10.1215/01903659-2009-009.
- Hatzfeld, Jean. 2005. *Into the Quick of Life: The Rwandan Genocide: The Survivors Speak*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Hatzfeld, Jean. 2009. *The Antelope's Strategy: Rwanda after the Genocide*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Hirsch, Joshua. 2004. *After Image: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hitchcott, Nicki. 2013. "(In)Visible Rwanda in Gilbert Gatore's *Le Passe devant soi*." *Research in African Literatures* 44 (2): 79–90. doi:10.2979/reseafrilite.44.2.76.
- Hron, Madelaine. 2012. "Genres of "Yet an Other Genocide" Cinematic Representations of Rwanda." In *Film and Genocide*, edited by K. Wilson and T. Crowder-Taraborrelli, 133–156. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hughes, Nick, dir. 2001. *100 Days*. Vivid Pictures.
- Hughes, Nick. 2007. "Exhibit 467: Genocide Through a Camera Lens." In *The Media and The Rwandan Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson, 231–34. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, Ottawa, Cairo, Dakar, Montevideo, Nairobi, New Delhi and Singapore: International Development Research Centre.
- Ibreck, Rachel. 2010. "The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-genocide Rwanda." *Memory Studies* 3 (4): 330–343. doi:10.1177/1750698010374921.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 2008. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge.
- Lynch, David, dir. 1986. *Blue Velvet*. De Laurentiis, Entertainment Group.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 2001. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Melvern, Linda. 2000. *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*. London: Zed Books.
- Möller, Frank. 2013. *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship and the Images of Violence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Naimasiah, Noosim. 2015. "In Conversation with Kivu Ruhorahoza." Warscapes, 5th June. Accessed July 2 2015. <http://www.warscapes.com/conversations/conversation-kivu-ruhorahoza>.
- Ndahiro, Alfred, and Privat Rutazibwa. 2008. *Hotel Rwanda or the Tutsi Genocide as Seen by Hollywood*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Noé, Gaspar, dir. 2002. *Irréversible*. Mars Distribution.
- Peck, Raoul, dir. 2004. *Sometimes in April*. HBO Films.
- Pham, Phuong N., Harvey Weinstein and Timothy Longman. 2004. "Trauma and PTSD Symptoms in Rwanda: Implications for Attitudes Toward Justice and Reconciliation." *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 292 (5): 602–612. doi:10.1001/jama.292.5.602.
- Rieder, Heide, and Thomas Elbert. 2013. "Rwanda – Lasting Imprints of a Genocide: Trauma, Mental Health and Psychosocial in Survivors, Former Prisoners and their Children." *Conflict and Health* 7 (online). doi:10.1186/1752-1505-7-6.
- Roskis, Edgar. 2007. "A Genocide Without Images: White Film Noirs." In *The Media and The Rwandan Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson, 238–241. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, Ottawa, Cairo, Dakar, Montevideo, Nairobi, New Delhi and Singapore: International Development Research Centre.
- Ruhorahoza, Kivu, dir. 2011. *Grey Matter*. Scarab Studio, Global Film Initiative. doi:10.1186/1752-1505-7-6.
- Spottiswoode, Roger, dir. 2007. *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Seville Pictures, Regent Releasing, DHX Media.
- Sutton, Paul. 2004. "Afterwardsness in Film." *Journal for Cultural Research* 8 (3): 385–405. doi:10.1080/1479758042000265000.
- Tasma, Alain, dir. 2007. *Operation Turquoise*. Canal +.

- Thompson, Allan. 2007. "Introduction." In *The Media and The Rwandan Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson, 1–11. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, Ottawa, Cairo, Dakar, Montevideo, Nairobi, New Delhi and Singapore: International Development Research Centre.
- Thompson, Allan. 2009. "The Genocide Video." *Media War & Conflict* 2 (3): 245–262. doi:10.1177/1750635209345184.
- Vidal, Claudine. 2001. "Les Commemorations du Genocide au Rwanda." *Les Temps Modernes* 56 (613): 1–46.
- Wallis, Andrew. 2006. *Silent Accomplice: The Untold Story of France's Role in the Rwandan Genocide*. London: I.B. Tauris.